

It is Advent & the Church is Pregnant, The Rev. Mary MacKenzie, 4 December 2011

It's Advent and the Church is pregnant. What is coming to birth in you? What is coming to birth in us?

This is the opening for each day's reflections in the Advent devotional that I'm using this year.

It is Advent and the Church is pregnant.

The other day, I was visiting with a friend, a cradle Episcopalian, and in the course of our conversation she said that she likes to keep a "Pure Advent."

Well, I'm not a cradle Episcopalian and this got me thinking. What IS a "pure" Advent? From the outside, it sometimes appears that to Advent purists, it means the absence of "Christmas" things – no decorations, no cards, no singing Christmas music. It does, however, include grumping about other people singing carols.

In many ways, it appears to be no different than the "ordinary time" liturgical seasons, except for perhaps an Advent wreath with candles on the dinner table.

Do you have any tangible signs or symbols that you use in your home to remind you that it's Advent?

Do you adopt any practices – spiritual or otherwise – during this season?

Advent is a distinct season. It is a season of expectation and hope while we are descending further into darkness. The nights are still growing longer, the days are getting colder.

Like Lent, Advent is a season of preparation. Lent is, in a way, preparation for death. Advent, though, is preparation for birth. It seems a bit ironic, doesn't it, that we prepare for birth in the depths of darkness when so much around us seems dead?

The Church is pregnant. What is coming to birth in you? What is coming to birth in us? What is coming to birth in our community; in our world? What may be coming to birth down at Occupy in the various cities? In Olympia? In Congress? In Syria or Egypt or Iran? What may be coming to birth in the SHARE community that sleeps in our undercroft? In the malls and movie theatres? In schools and daycare centers; hospitals and hospices; in ambulances and police cars?

How will we prepare for this birth? How will we receive what is born into our lives?

In today's readings, we hear two different prophets talking about preparing the way of the Lord, although I have to admit that one is quoting the other. Both speak of preparing a way for the Lord in the wilderness.

We often interpret this to mean a personal inward journey, taking stock, cleaning house, getting rid of all the things that are past the pull-date in our lives. Maybe even cleaning out stuff that never should have been brought into the house, so to speak. It's commonly called

examination of conscience and repentance. And this is certainly part of our preparation. It's always a good idea to clean out the closets in preparation for a birth.

But I'd like to suggest it's more than that. We hear in Isaiah, God calling to the prophet, saying "Comfort, O comfort my people." Isaiah is told to comfort God's people who are living in exile in Babylon, believing themselves to be separated from God. We may be tempted to hear those words as words to comfort us in the darkness and the wilderness of our own lives.

Maybe, though, we should hear those words as direction, as God's call to us to go to people in exile, in the wilderness, in darkness and give them comfort; to prepare the way for the Lord in their wilderness. What is the wilderness here and now for our world, our community? It may be an actual location, or it may be a very personal wilderness that is experienced within the life, the soul, of a person.

How might you speak God's word of comfort in that place or to that person? How might you show them the light of God's countenance? How might you prepare the way for the Lord in the wilderness?

It reminds me of one of my favorite Advent/Christmas books, *The Christmas Miracle of Jonathan Toomey*. Now Jonathan Toomey was not a friendly sort. He always walked around hunched over, looking at the ground, with a frown on his face. He never laughed and he rarely spoke and when he did, it was usually almost a growl. The children called him Jonathan Gloomy. He was a very skilled woodcarver though and lived by himself in his shop on the edge of town.

One day, a woman, a widow who was new in town, appeared at his door with her young son. She wanted him to carve a nativity set because hers had been lost when she moved. It had been very special to her and she couldn't imagine Christmas without it.

Jonathan didn't hold with such things, but agreed to do the job – no promises that it would be done in time, though.

A few days later, they were at his door again. The boy wanted to watch Jonathan work. Reluctantly, he agreed, as long as the boy was quiet and didn't squirm. The widow had brought a small offering of warm bread for his trouble. Well, the boy just couldn't completely contain himself and felt the need to correct Jonathan as he was carving the sheep – his were happy sheep. Jonathan harrumphed. That night, after supper that included the fresh bread, Jonathan continued working by the fire until he had the sheep just right.

Every few days, the widow and her son came back to watch Jonathan work. And each time, she brought some homemade treat. And each time, the boy told Jonathan how his cows were, or the shepherds, or Joseph. And each time, Jonathan stood up a little straighter, cleaned up the crumbs from his beard, straightened the house a little more, and greeted them a little less coldly and eventually even warmly. He even gave the boy a piece of wood and taught him a little about how to carve.

On the morning of Christmas Eve, the widow and the boy came with presents – the scarf she had been knitting during their visits, and the little bird that the boy had carved. That night, Jonathan worked all night on the last two figures, Mary and Jesus. He pulled out the only picture he owned to use as a model – a picture of his wife and little child who had died many, many years before.

In the morning, he went to the widow's door to give her the completed set. And then as the bells of Christmas pealed, they walked together to the church. And for the first time in many years, Jonathan Toomey laughed.

We don't need to know or understand the wilderness before we can bring light and comfort into it. Sometimes it only requires a small act of kindness or two. But it does require that we slow down enough to pay attention, to see through the walls and see Christ in the most unlikely places and people.

The Church is pregnant. What is coming to birth? How will we prepare?